

WHITE ALBUM 2  
Twinkle Snow  
～ 夢想～

丸戸史明

Illustration  
みぶなつき



White Album 2 Omake

Twinkle Snow ~Reverie~

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# Notes

- It is recommended that this story be read after playing "WHITE ALBUM 2 - introductory chapter-" **twice**. The story is considered an "alternate universe", but it's important that the introductory chapter be read first to understand the differences between the game and this universe.
- It's also recommended to listen to the drama CD, *Before The Festival ~The Two's 24 Hours~* / 祭りの前 ～ふたりの 24 時間～
- In the PS3 version, this story is unlocked by reading *After The Festival ~Setsuna's Thirty Minutes~* / 祭りの後 ～雪菜の三十分～

# Prologue

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"Hey, Touma..."

"Ever since we first met... you were the one I always liked."

"Like I know what your feelings are."

"What I believe in is my own feelings."

"..... I love you."



# 1

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"You don't have to put in so much power. Just pull it from the side slowly."

"Mmm..."

It was December.

The trees had given up their leaves, and in return, a large tree was placed in front of the station for a particular occasion. It was a sign that the winter season had started.

"Ah, don't pull from the edge of the sprout, pull over there instead."

"Where the hell is *there*...?"

The last glimmer of their student lives, the school festival, had ended, and all that was left were the days counting down their remaining four months.

"Ah~, you're peeling too deep. There won't be anything left to eat then."

"....."

Having said that, in truth only two of those months would be colored as such.

The students had already decided on their career choices, so for a school affiliated to a university, these remaining days might either be a strong or weak point.

But within all of this, there were also students who were recommended to other universities or didn't make it. With the exception of those who went into the workforce, this left hundreds who were stranded.

"Yeah, for now this should do."

"Phew~"

"Well then, there's five potatoes left. And then two carrots..."

".....!"

They were people picked in the minority, in such a feverish, hopeless situation...

"Ahhhhhhhhh~, like I'm gonna peel anything like this~!"

"Ah~, wait, don't stop now, Kazusa!"

It was a race... well, it should have been. Thirty minutes ago.

"Cooking is so boring."

"We only just started..."

Touma Kazusa, the girl with long black hair. She started relaxing, taking a seat in the kitchen soon after abandoning her potato peeler.

She was in class 3-E of the School of Houjou University. She would always be in the corner of the classroom indulging herself in her hobbies. But with only three months left until graduation, her future was quite uncertain, not having decided on her career path or any kind of direction.

"Besides, I'm not into small work like this. You know the words, *the right person in the right place*, right?"

"Those aren't the words of such an extremely delicate pianist, you know..."

A young girl by the name of Ogiso Setsuna also stood there, her long hair tied into two ponytails. She'd been cutting with a kitchen knife in a rhythm. Her accurate interjections into Kazusa's words were also unforgettable.

She was in class 3-A of the School of Houjou University. Whether she liked it or not, she already had admirers. After some perseverance in order to protect that cute image already built of her, she was content with the prosperous future of being eligible to immediately go into Houjou University.

"That's right, I'm a pianist. What do you expect me to do if I cut my fingertips with cutlery?"

"But Kazusa, you were the one who said, *"A girl who can't make even curry is finished"*."

"Setsuna, you're the one who came up with the idea of making curry. Besides, didn't we gather to cram for exams...?"

"I wonder who it was that came in here with such a desperate look on their face..."

Again... it was December.

In preparation for the term exams starting tomorrow, they should have been spending their last days delicately, though in a direction they wouldn't have liked.

And yet, although all of them had gathered at the Ogiso residence to help the lazy pianist whose graduation was in doubt, everyone was in the kitchen making dinner. With the exception of one guy.

"Hey, is it okay if I don't help?"

"Don't come. You just stay in that room and study alone."

"... okay, who was it that needed to study again today?"

The guy that came into the hallway not looking rather presentable or having any kind of hairdo was named Kitahara Haruki.

"Anyways, you can just leave dinner to us."

"To us..... huh."

"It'll be faster if the three of us work together. Then we can finish eating, and continue studies again. Besides, you didn't even finish a single subject here."

He was in class 3-E of the School of Houjou University. He did things by the book, taking care of everyone, and even lecturing people regardless of what division of the school they were in. Thanks to all that, he was recommended to Houjou University, only needing to wait for the all but guaranteed reply at the graduation ceremony.

"Shut up, besides you'd just complain about each and every single thing if you helped us anyway. And you've never cooked even once."



"Even if I haven't, anyone can at least peel potatoes."

"You're right~, if you're patient, yup."

"Setsuna... just be quiet if you have anything to say."

Kazusa stopped slacking off thanks to Haruki stepping in, once again standing beside Setsuna and taking the relatively easier task of cutting carrots.

"A-Anyway! ... don't listen to whatever he has to say, okay?"

... she seemed to be whispering into Setsuna's ears.

"Which was?"

"L-Look, that whole *"A girl who can't make even curry is finished"* thing."

"That you can't make curry, Kazusa? Or maybe you mean that you could almost die from being so worried that he might hate you?"

"Wah~, wah~, waaaaah~!"

"The latter, huh? Got it."

"... Setsuna, you really do have a good personality."

Once again, it was December.

It'd been two weeks... two weeks since Kazusa and Haruki became lovers.

Two weeks ago.

The great success of the stage performance at the school festival came to an end.

The praise and calls for an encore didn't let up towards Setsuna, who was as pure as expected but put on far more of a show with her singing than anyone could imagine. This also carried to Kazusa, who played the keyboard, saxophone

and bass perfectly. And Haruki, who played the guitar as much as he could, was given quite the applause.

"Hmm..."

"H-How is it?"

"How, you ask...? Seems like Ja■■■ curry to me."

**TL Note:** Censored, probably Jadian curry

"... your choice of words are horrible. Did you mean that, or is it plain, or is it spicy?"

"Haruki-kun, what's the flavor like? Give us your impressions!"

"Well, you see... it just feels like Ja■■■ curry."

"Oh whatever! We should never have fed someone who didn't recognize how hard we worked."

"K-Kazusa... and come on, Haruki-kun..."

"I do like Ja■■■ curry. I've been fine with spicy food since middle school because of this."

"Eh...?"

"Then...?"

"Any seconds?"

"....."

"This is good. Like it always is."

Two hours after the best fifteen minutes of their lives...

The two in the support band who gave it their all for the idol headed to the second music room as a substitute for the change room in the evening. And it was there that the two confirmed their feelings for one another.

"... seconds!"

"Y-Yeah... Setsuna?"

"I want seconds too, Kazusa!"

"Y-Yeah... I'll go get some then."

"Ah, that's quite a large serving you're dealing with."

"I know that!"

Which was why now, the guy and girl in the support band had such unfriendly, blunt compliments for one another, reacting so nervously like this.

"Heh, hehe... ahahaha..."

"... what's so funny?"

"Because Kazusa, your face changed so many times!"

Which was why now, the idol girl couldn't contain her laughter for the girl in the support band, overreacting as she took curry dishes in excitement and left the room.

"Did I do something bad?"

"Maybe you didn't quite get what was going on. You only needed to say it was delicious after taking one bite!"

"But that was obviously just Ja■■■ curry... well, you're right, sorry."

"Well, thanks to that I got to see Kazusa sorta half-crying, so I'm totally OK with that."

"... I've been thinking before, but you certainly have a good personality, Setsuna."

The three never stepped down from that stage after the festival ended, this flow of events indicating that they continued to watch that dream.

As the three of them, with two as lovers, and a cupid to hold them together.

Two hours later.

"Look, I did say it was delicious."

"Yeah, Ja■■■ curry is delicious. It's the same flavor no matter who makes it."

Eating dinner, the three took a break and had a lively chat for some time, and as Haruki moved to bring them back to their study session, it had become increasingly late at night.

"I did ask for three dishes. Even you were happy about it."

"I was just fooling you. My standards would be far too low if I indulged myself in those faithful words of yours."

In the end, they didn't really get to study all that much, but they did manage to get much nourishment, leaving the Ogiso residence with oranges as their spoils of today's efforts.

"I'm telling you, don't be like that... I was really happy."

"Ah~, that's right, it's your favorite Ja■■■ curry anyway..."

"That's because... it had a *"mother's flavor"*, see."

"Eh...?"

And they ended up talking about when they were eating curry in the cold weather.

"At least once a month my mother would have this big pot, see... I'd warm it myself and eat some..."

"....."

"She'd always have side-dishes ready to go on the table, though."

"My mother would make the curry herself, though it wasn't exactly perfect... well, in any event it was still Ja■■■ curry."

"We never really ate together, in the morning, noon, or evening..."

"Even then, my kitchen would smell like curry for a day, so compared to that I was a bit happy with yours."

"....."

Haruki also looked up at the stars that had turned into ice grains in the cold weather.

His breathing directed towards the sky came out in white, covering the stars like a cloud would.

That expression of his was certainly happy, nostalgic, and perhaps a little bit sad...

"Which was why, I was really..."

"Hey..."

"Hmm?"

"... you're still trying to fool me. Just putting up some suitable excuses."

"... ah, you could tell?"

... this attitude that Kazusa displayed was proof that her title as a "girl" from two weeks ago was no longer there.

"Don't run away into such painful memories. My mother's only ever made me toast."

"Well... I guess that's Touma Youko for you."

"I told you before, it doesn't matter if your past isn't all that great. Besides..."

"Ah, in that case..."

"What?"

"How about I make curry next time?"

"..... wha?"

That was why Kazusa would eventually give a frowning expression whenever Haruki made such suggestions...

"As thanks for today. Like maybe when the tests end."

"..... what, are you...?"

"But I can't make much other than Ja■■■ curry. Hmm, maybe I'll try putting

seafood instead?"

"Instead of curry..... I like pudding..."

The moment she accepted such suggestions, it was already too late for her to make any kind of grand reaction.

"Pudding, huh...? Then what about h■■se pudding? The one you make with just milk."

**TL Note: Censored, probably house pudding**

"Then get three bags and make it in a bowl."

"It'll get messed up if I did that..."

"Don't worry. I'll just eat from the bowl with a spoon."

"... correct me if I'm wrong, but you're not gonna eat all that in one shot are you?"

"Well, you had three dishes worth of curry today. That amount makes us about even."

"The nutrition's completely off the scale! There's too much sugar and fat!"

Which was why in this cold weather, the two contemplated what pudding should be a prize after the tests. They walked in an empty neighborhood making such a fuss that could be considered a nuisance.

"....."

"....."

And, thirty-five minutes later.

It took fifteen minutes to get from the Ogiso residence to the Minamisuetsugu station, ten minutes by train to get to Iwazuchou station, and then they walked for another ten minutes.

At some point, the two lost words to share, walking in a neighborhood where a white wall stretched out on their left.

"....."

"....."

And the reason they became silent, that white wall happens to belong to the mansion of a world-acclaimed pianist, which meant that as soon as they turn the corner...

"... what is it?"

"I-It's nothing... sorry..."

The two were soon on the verge of losing any reason to be walking side by side only after several steps...

With a timid face, the boy held the girl's hand, as the two held oranges in the other.

"Why now, of all times?"

The girl... Kazusa's upturned, resentful eyes, glittered when the faint street light illuminated upon her.

The words and gaze she had were quite delicate, whether they condemned Haruki for his sudden urges, or how she had been holding back up until now.

"You, don't want to?"

"Yeah, I don't."

"I-I see, I'm sor..."

"I don't want you to step away from me."

"Eh?"

In between those short words, the two's hands touched and separated, and then entangled themselves with one another.

"My hands aren't that of a girl's."

"Ah..."

"They're fingers that are much harder and rugged than yours, or even a man's."

Attacking, rejecting, hesitating, and turning around.

"Like I'd do that."

"But..."

"Because these are the hands of my teacher."

"..."

And then the boy finally mustered up his courage, and cut off her retreat...

Finally entangling his own fingers with her rugged fingers.

"I told you that I like these marks showing your effort... and that I like your piano, right?"

Her fingers really were tough.

They were tempered since she was a child that they wouldn't let up even when she skipped out on training for the two years since enrolling.

Well, perhaps she only claimed that she was. Perhaps, actually, she could never let go of the piano, and her fingertips were full of that pride and willpower.

"Why do you make such a face with embarrassing words that don't even fit? You really are a painful guy."

"Because it's just the two of us, isn't it?"

"Even now when these hands could frost over, you say such cold words that



could make me freeze..."

"That's why I'll warm you up, like this..."

"Hey, wait...!"

The bags holding the oranges in their hands dropped, and soon both their hands clasped against one another.

It wasn't just the palms of their hands that were touching. Each of their fingers were intertwined.

The two directly faced each other, no longer walking or making any kind of excuses.

"... it's because you said you wanted to be like this, you know?"

"Yeah."

"Because you wanted everything, you know?"

"Yeah."

"So, so... I won't let go of you."

"Yeah."

"Until you tell me to *"let go"*, I'll remain like this with you."

"Don't let go, Kazusa."

"..... Haruki..."

Two weeks since the two became lovers.

Two weeks since the two started calling each other by name.

"... even though I say that, why are you making such a face?"

Touma Kazusa was a girl who had a hard time looking at others.

"Because I feel like I'm about to cry..."

"....."

But that was because these weren't the eyes of a lonely wolf that rejected everything. It was more like, they were that of an abandoned dog, who was <sup>bait</sup> fed the forbidden fruit...

"We're dating, aren't we? We're flirting, aren't we?"

"Why is it every single thing you say is painful?"

"Look now, all you have to do is smile for just a bit."

"That's... if I feel like it..."

"But you know..."

"Will I lose you one day? Will I part ways with you one day? Will I awaken from my dream one day...?"

"Ah..."

"That's what I've felt like doing all this time, only thinking of just that..."

"Kazusa..."

Touma Kazusa, was no longer lonely.

"You won't go anywhere will you, Haruki?"

But, she was cowardly.

"You won't go anywhere like my mother, will you...?"

She hesitated, even though she fell in love with someone.

She kept imagining being betrayed.

As a girl, it was an overreaction that she kept imagining of her loved one.

"Let's see... close your eyes, okay?"

"Nngh!"

"... why do you have to close your eyes so hard all of a sudden?"

"Because, because..... you're gonna, aren't you?"

"Well, sure."

"So hurry... just finish it already..."

"Why do you have to say such things that kill the atmosphere?"

"Because, because..... it, it's embarrassing!"

But, little by little...

It was that transition period right now, where she'd take back her own honesty, even if it was just a little bit.

"I like those mixed up words of yours..."

"Y-You idiot... angh, mmm, mmm..."

They were almost two steps away from the entrance of the Touma household.

Kazusa knew that the moment she got in it'd be warm, but she could no longer move.

Not until her master dispelled the magic that told her to *"wait"*.

## 2

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"Well, having said that, the end of the term's already over~!"

"What's with the *"having said that"* anyway...?"

"Sweepy..."

"..... grr..."

*"Having said that"* now...

The term exams stormed through in an instant, and finally ended with English on Thursday, today.

"... you're again talking down on me quite a bit, Haruki. You planning to go out with a bang and hit the top on all subjects?"

"Like I can do something that doesn't have such bang for buck... obviously I'm going for average here."

"Well now, you're already sleeping. And randomly talking gibberish."

"I had a lot of stuff to deal with. Graduating is a quite a bit to handle... and also, I'm awake."

The cafeteria had fewer students than usual. There were four people seated at one of the tables, liberated from the exams.

Haruki, "self-proclaimed" best friend Iizuka Takeya, bad company "both in name and reality" Mizusawa Io, and...

"... zzz..."

"... you should wake up soon, Patrasche. You'll freeze to death."

**TL Note:** Patrasche is from [A Dog of Flanders](#)

"Mmm...?"

Kazusa, who was fast asleep already being called to God, was beside Haruki as he rubbed his eyes, having used up all his strength.

"Touma-san, you've been out of it recently haven't you? In a lot of ways."

"Hey Haruki, I know you've been the enemy of 90% of the men during the school festival, but you're pretty aggressive to be picking a fight with the remaining 10%..."

The two spoke up, astonished at this spectacle of a defenseless Kazusa. She placed her head on her boyfriend's shoulder in complete relaxation, Haruki taking it naturally.

Io and Takeya were aware of the details. This scene was mostly seen by the class E students as if it were a puppy that were playing around. Though those sentiments were rather empty.

"Come on, don't stare if you're so sleepy. I'll give you a handkerchief..."

"Who the hell is Patrasche? And besides, not like I'd sleep with this guitar player who's so tone-deaf. Even if he got a picture of Rubens (dog), it'd be a calculation sheet instead."

Leaving such a belch on their words, unlike what she usually did, the puppy would wake up, not think of a single thing, and just sleep until the day after tomorrow.

"Even if I go to take everything at the Touma household, I won't send you anything. I'll just take it for myself and live happily."

"What do you call that... you really are a depressing guy, Haruki."

The two felt a little helpless and even more sick to their stomach, seeing her snore "zzzzzz... zzzzzzz..." like that.

"Well, doesn't matter if you're hiding your own embarrassment, but shouldn't you wake her up soon?"

"No one's doing that. Besides, she's..."

"Setsuna-chan should be heading back here right about now..."

"....."

"....."

It was as if Takeya remembered, but when he chose to mention it was at his own discretion. At the same time, the entire table immediately returned to the previous atmosphere.

"Ah~, you guys are here! Sorry to keep you waiting~"

Indeed, as estimated, Setsuna came calling within ten seconds.

"Artists seem to have some different kind of sense from normal people I hear."

"Hmm?"

The closing party for the exams was something she insisted on, at the  
her home turf  
karaoke in front of the station.

Setsuna led everyone there, and along the way, Io caught up to her. She made sure that no one could hear them talk as they entered the shopping district in front of the station.

"That girl, you know, she seems a lot like a child, doesn't she?"

"She's really cute, isn't she~"

"Well, I guess... my impression of her changed a lot since I first met her."

"That'd be well... because of girls often doing *that*."

"Yes, *that*', that..."

*That* being "if they fall in love"...

... indeed, no one would hear them say such embarrassing things, but even so the two could understand exactly what the other wanted to say.

"How should I put it, there's so many things you could tease them about, it's a bit troubling~"

"Yeah, I get that. She won't get the jokes... if it's about a specific topic."

Kazusa had dramatically changed within the span of a month.

She'd react strongly to <sup>anything about Haruki</sup> a particular topic . If one had to provide examples, she'd quickly get angry, suddenly get embarrassed, immediately become stubborn, and then it's as if she might cry.

It brought back some uncomfortable feelings to Io, with people teasing her going *"nyaah, nyaah~"* back in primary school.

"She really is so pure, so serious..... and so precious, I think."

"..... y, yeah~. Umm. Look. Don't get yourself down."

Incidentally now, she happened to realize that Setsuna stepped on a landmine that would make her uncomfortable for different reasons.

"Come on now, I'm not depressed or anything."

At the very least, Setsuna should have realized her own feelings, though she didn't know if anyone else noticed or didn't notice.

"Besides, I was rejected, you know?"

"Setsuna..."

"I didn't follow your advice, Io... no, even if I did, the result would have ended up the same. I completely lost to Kazusa."

*"He's really serious, you know, so it's better if you hurry."*

"Even so, I think the way things ended is for the best."

Though this end was what I feared.

But it seemed to be something that Setsuna wished for.

"Because this was the best choice so that the three of us could be together."

"The three of you... huh."

"Haruki-kun's so kind to me even now, and I finally became Kazusa's best friend."

Yes, Setsuna and Kazusa became best friends.

The week following the school festival, on the rooftop in the evening.

*"Can I... can I call you Kazusa?"*

*"Ogiso..."*

*"..... let's try again."*

*"..... Setsuna...!"*

"So I'm fine now, okay?"

Just like that time, when Kazusa cried like a child.

Just like that time, when Setsuna smiled a little devilishly.

"The two of them granted my wish, after all."

"I see."

"Yup, they did."

The two of them vowed to be together as three.

Though they left out one guy in this, but Setsuna understood that.

"Then, be sure to hang in there, Setsuna."

"There's nothing to do about that~, come on! I'm having the happiest and best time of my life, so why should I stop?"



That would be called a future that one person desired...

"Then it's fine... well, if anything happens, just ask us. We'll hear if you have complaints or whatever."

"... Io, you make it sound like you're an outsider, you know?"

"Well, because I..."

"You guys have other problems that you need to get cleared up, right? It's like you can't get ahead at all, even after six years."

"Wha...!?"

Setsuna fired back at her, demonstrating a thorough understanding of what Io meant by *"one person other than us"*.

"If anything happens with that, you can come join our group. Do your best until it's just the two of you. Ah, if you have any complaints, I'll hear them out."

"H-Hey, Setsuna...!"

"Spring won't come for me... such a new school term isn't so bad, you know?"

She gave a wink to the dumbfounded Io who stood there, without letting the guys notice.

"Come on~, hurry up, hurry up! Service time for the day ends at 6 PM, you know~!"

And then Setsuna left Io there, speeding away.

"Hey, how many hours does she plan on singing for...?"

Finally murmuring an interjection to herself, Setsuna no longer showed her that wink.

Setsuna had delicately changed within the span of a month.

She felt like she had broken down a wall that had been there until now. For example, she became a little more chatty, mischievous, nosy, and she always smiled.

"Setsuna, you..."

Io continued to murmur quietly to herself, not really talking to anyone anymore.

"You became a little more of an adult."

Did she naturally become like that, or was it necessary for her?

Was it proof that she had grown, or was it the result of losing something?

There was no way for Io to tell.

"Now then... Merry Christmas!"

"Merry, Christmas..."

"Merry... Christmas..."

The three began their Christmas party by raising their drinking glasses, each of them speaking in particularly different tones.

"Uwaah, this is good... isn't it nice to be eating sashima and tempura around a hot pot on Christmas?"

"Christmas pudding and chawanmushi are rather similar... ingredients-wise."

"There's also chicken amongst all this in this hot pot... "

**TL Note: Chawanmushi – an egg custard dish found in Japan**

Though with such a party, they had to have various delicacies in different colors all lined up, and they had to wear yukatas with the hot spring ryokan logo on them.

**TL Note: Ryokan – traditional japanese inn**

"Still though, it looks great out there... it's a White Christmas!"

"I guess."

"We did go out of our way for this."

This was all on Setsuna's strong insistence, <sup>one person</sup> who said things like *"Let's go see the snow!", "There'll be some once the winter holidays start",* and *"I'd like to go to a hot spring"*.

"Speaking of which, it's amazing that it's a rotenburo! With no roof, the snow came falling in!"

**TL Note: Rotenburo – open-air hot spring**

"And it got colder and colder... and the moment it built up it felt like I was gonna freeze to death."

"Certainly it's cold, but it felt so great! You should have also come in too, Harukikun!"

"I don't have such willpower..."

After bringing up such non-feminine ambitions, she moved delicately but quickly, reserving the ryokan through a relative managing the place. Forcibly persuading both her parents, she came up with an itinerary for the three of them on her own, finally coming down to the long-awaited day.

"You're pretty useless if you're exhausted from just that."

"You guys sure are lively..."

"Because I live quite differently. Especially the part where I hadn't gotten any sleep for two months."

"November was certainly my fault, but you reap what you sow this month..."

Setsuna was really the only one who worked hard on this plan for the past several days.

The other two only said, "*Hot springs...?*", leaving the rest all up to her.

"Geez, there was so much to deal with this year when thinking about it. Come on, let's drink, drink!"

"Setsuna, you sure are into this year-end party."

"Of course it's a year-end party if it's like this. If you say it's a Christmas party, the Westerners here will get angry."

After all, neither of them were in any position to go with Kazusa's inch-by-inch approach.

Because they trusted that much in how Setsuna did things.

"I'm fine with it being a Christmas or year-end party. I'm with the people I want to be with, anyway."

And that was something the two... no, what the three understood.

"Yes, yes, Princess Setsuna. Everything is as your heart desires."

"... well, whatever. Merry Christmas."

It was "that sort of" feeling Setsuna had, that the two wouldn't be able to stop.

"Umm, welcome, everyone! I thank you so much for taking the time to come here!"

And, time happens to fly when you're having fun after all...

With her having said that, the three of them were so into it that they couldn't really stop it from ending.

"Today... umm, well we have a lot of things to toast to that we probably might not be able to cover it all so quickly. Well, we have a lot of time to kill, so that's fine, right?"

The real party began, with the waitress coming by to take plates from the table as the food had run out.

When the adults weren't around, Kazusa decided to pull out champagne from her bag at her discretion, while Setsuna brought out pastries. And like this, they began their second toast.

"Umm... first off, Merry Christmas, once again!"

The three's Christmas Eve was blessed by the sound of their glasses touching each other, actually sounding like a bell ringing.

"And, to our graduation!"

"Well, one of us sure is like a Christmas eve miracle."

"Go home. Walk all the way to Tokyo, right now."

This time, the three raised their glasses to slightly moderated voices.

At any rate, just as Setsuna's festive words displayed, their graduation was decided before the winter vacation, after having gone through the term exams and the supplementary exams the week after.

On the last day, and until the bitter end, the haggard <sup>Haruki</sup> kagemusha who felt like he lost three years of his life span, survived to tell of the senseless battle. This was in stark contrast to the person <sup>Kazusa</sup> responsible, who overcame all obstacles while humming away.

**TL Note: Kagemusha - a body double used by generals back in the day**

"We barely made it through alive today, didn't we?"

"I'm not riding with you behind the wheel ever again."

"Oh, so you really did plan on walking all the way back to Tokyo. You're better than I thought."

Beginning her first experience on the freeway, going around the mountains, driving on snow-covered roads, getting lost, and then an accident...

The unconcerned, <sup>Kazusa</sup> whistling driver and the haggard-looking <sup>Haruki</sup> navigator had remained in the car since the test, even as the ryokan's car towed them out of the snow embankment to their destination.

"To Kazusa... and reconciling with her mother."

"H-Hey..."

"I also wanted to see that moment too..."

"Yup yup, I'm sure Kazusa was in tears at that time..."

"..... hey..."

Touma Youko, Kazusa's mother hadn't contacted her for about half a year. She called her immediately following the culture festival stage performance.

By the way, this call also happened just after Kazusa got a boyfriend...

This delicious story was something Youko would not overlook, as a world-famous pianist in many love affairs. Apparently, it turned into a furious quarrel between a parent and her child, with Kazusa running a commotion on her cellphone, turning shy, outspoken, and hiding things.

... yes, turning eighteen, it was the first time Kazusa had ever gotten into a serious argument with her mother.

When Kazusa told the two, no one held back the smiles on their faces. To Haruki and Setsuna, it was the happiest moment of their lives.

"And to the revival of the pianist prodigy, Touma Kazusa."

"You're making a big fuss over me going not having gone to a competition in so long."

"But, you said so yourself that you'd definitely win, yeah?"

"Oh, oh, and to the hopes Kazusa will go on to a music university!"

"I'll just be recommended to whatever I pick, so it'll be easy."

"Yup, just like that."

The fortunes of Kazusa as well as everyone else didn't stop there.

One of which was when Youko, not being one to give up on her daughter's ability, seemed to be deeply moved by Kazusa's performance at a simple culture festival, and she proposed a chance for her to revive herself as a pianist.

She'd be recommended into a music college and gain support for all her music activities, if she does well at the piano competition in the beginning of next year... though somehow this seemed like cheat that would transform a NEET who's only good at the piano into a young and hopeful Japanese classic pianist...

"E-Enough about me... this time, to you guys going into Houjou University."

"Thank you, Kazusa..."

Kazusa was blushing even though she hadn't taken a sip of alcohol yet. She followed Setsuna's lead, raising her glass against the others...

"Well, it's pretty obvious for us, so we're just doing what's obvious."

"Correction... to Setsuna getting into Houjou University."

Only Haruki's glass slumped over from that feint.

"And umm, finally... though this is just a wish I want to make..."

It would seem this was the last toast, as Setsuna again took the lead, raising her glass much higher than all the others.

"To a reunion of the School of Houjou University's light music club, on this day..."

But compared to how high she raised her cup, her words gradually lost its strength.

"Umm, like maybe.... next year, the year after..."

"....."

"....."



"So we can again see the snow like this, go into the baths, and talk all night long..."

It wasn't just her tone of voice that lowered from what seemed like a bell that was ringing. Her confidence and her gaze fell to the table.

"Maybe, maybe I'm saying something a bit painful. Maybe it's just something that I'd like."

"Maybe, it might get into the way of you two..."

"Setsuna..."

Haruki had seen this expression of hers twice.

"But, but you know... I'm, fine with the three of us."

"I don't want to lose Kazusa or Haruki-kun."

The first time was the first day of the school festival, before the day of the stage performance.

Not able to bring out her voice during the rehearsal, he came to pick her up at the classroom where she had lost her confidence. She seemed as if she would cry, but had a fleeting smile as a somewhat happy waitress.

"Oh no, what am I saying now... maybe I'm really being thoughtless."

And then the second time...

The second time was after the festival, in the evening at the second music room.

Gently waking up Haruki who had fallen asleep, she had come to tell him something important...

"Even so, even so... I, I...!"

"Ah, geez!"

"Ow!?"

"K-Kazusa?"

To Setsuna it was a knuckle on top of her head that came out of nowhere.

"What are you so hesitant about!? Setsuna, you were the one who scolded me about that kind of attitude! You were the one who gave me support!"

But, to Kazusa it was something that she could no longer stand.

"So we'll promise you, Setsuna... it'll always be the three of us."

"A-Aah..."

Faint of heart as she reached her limit, Kazusa's benefactor couldn't hold in her worries or her tears.

"We'll meet again next year, and the year after... I'm sure, it'll continue. Right, Haruki?"

"That's... no matter what reasons you give me for skipping out, you know?"

"Kazusaaa... Haruki-kun...!"

"Geez~ this is embarrassing, it really is. I wanna just drink and forget it all now!"

However, Kazusa couldn't help but egg on Setsuna the thoughtless girl, blushing even more as she raised her cup hidden in her yukata sleeve.

"With that said... this time is the last one Setsuna... so we're gonna wrap this up, okay?"

"Y-Yup... yup!"

Being reassured by her best friend, Setsuna's face was red even though she hadn't taken any alcohol yet. No longer being able to hold it in, her voice came out like a broken bell, with tears rolling over her face.

"Well then... well then, to the three of us."

"Cheers..."

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

It was around 4 AM, with the lights turned off in the room and only the light of the snow coming from the window.

"Thanks."

"For?"

They'd fooled around with the champagne, went all in together in the rotenburo, and now causing a ruckus where they slept.

"The toast from earlier."

"That was... because it was tiring to hold my glass."

"Of course I felt the same way, but that's not it."

"Then, what?"

When it seemed everyone had finally gone to sleep, Setsuna had gone over to the other room without letting Haruki notice, bothering Kazusa in the the futon right beside him.

"I'm glad you said that us three would always be together..."

"Being so grateful about something so obvious... umm, is worrying."

Of course she went to wake up Kazusa... in addition, while making sure Haruki was asleep.

"I'm glad I have you as a friend, Kazusa."

"Setsuna..."

Because this was something that she had to tell Kazusa.

"I was so happy when you said you'd be my best friend..."

And it was something that she had to make sure Haruki wouldn't hear.

"Heh, heheh... ng, gg, mmph... ahaha..."

"Ugh, enough already..."

Setsuna was still dragging herself along for the past couple of hours.

It was quite a ridiculous scene of hers, expressing all of her emotions over being happy from just one sentiment.

Setsuna's face, voice, words, and tears were all jumbled together. This feeling of hers that was so confusing it didn't have any kind of shape, sound or color, and because it was confusing she spoke directly about it. It caused Kazusa to unconsciously turn her back towards her while lying in the futon.

Because just a few months ago, Kazusa would cut herself off from other people's emotions, and she was really bad with dealing with such unreasonable, direct feelings coming from her.

"Hey, Setsuna."

"Mm, mmm?"

"Why me?"

"Fueh?"

It was the only question Kazusa could ask while trying to avoid Setsuna.

"Why not Misuzawa or any of the others? Why am I your best friend?"

Because, not liking someone is not the same thing as hating them.

"Why someone like me, who's so anti-social, has a bad mouth, bad personality, hates pretty much everyone? Why did you feel like getting along with someone who was the worst as a human being?"

"Kazusa..."

"Plus, I'm not smart, I'm only good at the piano, and I had stopped playing the piano for so long, and I could have ended up becoming a shut-in, you know?"

"....."

"And, and you know... y-you're..."

"Let's see..."

And then, Setsuna returned to a rather calm tone she hadn't had in a while. Was it because she got tired of Kazusa hating herself? Or was it because she had to speak up first?

"Because, you're cute..."

"Nghaa!?"

A weight dropped in from behind Kazusa's back.

... at some point, Setsuna happened to slip into Kazusa's futon.

"Heheh... Kazusaaa..."

"Wa-Wait a second Setsuna... are you still drunk!?"

"Of course not~, I've been sober for some time now~!"

"That'd be more of a reason to worry!"

A soft and warm feeling spread behind Kazusa's back.

She sensed a faint, beautiful aroma coming from Setsuna's skin that was mixed with that of hot spring water and soap.

"Heheh, no need to be so afraid... I just wanted to hug and kiss you, you know!"

"I'd be freaked out by that!"

With a warm breath, Setsuna spoke alluring words close to her ear.

Her hands reached from Kazusa's back to her stomach and chest. She fondled a soft and smooth skin not unlike hers, as if she were violating her.



"Ah~, I do mean it as a joke, but it's so soft and smells so good, it feels kinda nice... well, whatever, it is Kazusa after all, so I'll..."

"It's not good in my case!"

"You sure you're fine with speaking so loud...? Haruki-kun might wake up..."

"Uu... n-no, sto..."

"..... well, it is cute hearing such a quiet voice..."

"..... eh?"

And then, Setsuna pulled away her arms in an instant, and the soft feeling of her chest on Kazusa's back disappeared.

"We're even now, Kazusa."

"W-What do you..."

"I'm talking about that *What are you so hesitant about!?* thing."

"Ah..."

In return, Setsuna faintly touched Kazusa's head from the back with a fist.

"So, promise me, Kazusa..... we'll always be best friends."

"S-Setsuna... you know!"

"Heheh, were you scared?"

"Do you know how much your actions would make others feel so helpless!?"

This time, Kazusa was so shaken up that she spoke up in a high-pitched voice, perhaps to hide that she was seriously about to cry.

"Eh~? I don't think that at all~"

"It does! Just now, as a woman, I felt my heart racing so fast!"

"Heheh, really? I'm happy that you felt that way, Kazusa..."

"That's what I'm saying, there's no man or woman who wouldn't get close to you."

"Hmm~ I think you're overestimating me~"

Maybe she was so unreasonably shaken up.

Or perhaps Setsuna displayed far too much emotion?

"That's why at first, I felt I wasn't good with you. I was scared. I was paranoid."

"Eh... why?"

"....."

Kazusa carelessly spoke of those dark feelings she planned to carry with her to her grave.

"Hey... how come?"

"Well because... don't tell him, okay?"

"... okay."

"I thought... I thought you'd take him."

"... ah~"

"I thought... I'd lose if it was you."

*"Touma-san, right?"*

*"Ogiso... Setsuna..."*

Because it was the first time Setsuna had called her by her name.

Because it was the first time Setsuna looked into her eyes.

"I guess I really am the worst as a person."

"....."

Kazusa realized her feelings were going in the same direction as Setsuna.

"Hey, Setsuna... look, are you really fine with me as your best friend...?"

"That part about you's also cute~"

"W-Wha?"

But it wasn't that it all went in the same direction as Kazusa.

"How you're desperately trying to hide things that people'll find out."



Because it was the first time she called out to Kazusa.

Because it was the first time Kazusa saw eyes looking at her that swayed her.

"Isn't it a girlish train of thought to think the way you look, talk, and act all don't match up?"

Setsuna noticed that Kazusa's feelings were far more intense than hers.

"S-Setsuna...?"

"Hehe... heheheh, ahahaha!"

"D-Don't laugh, hey..."

"B-But you, but you know... oh god, Kazusa... Kazusa, you know..."

"Is it okay for you to be laughing...?"

"Eh, why?"

Yes, the two knew from the start.

That the two of them were conscious of the same guy.

"Is it okay for you to be laughing now? Would it really end with you laughing?"

"Well, that's..."

"I... I betrayed you, you know?"

But that was something the two had confirmed of one another before the festival.

"The guy I like most is Kitahara Haruki-kun of class 3-E! ... is that good enough?"

"The guy, I like... is..... is umm, no one."

At that moment, Kazusa had once stepped away from that face-off.

She hadn't responded to Setsuna's declaration.

"Am I... really your best friend? Is it really okay...?"

Even so, right now the one beside Haruki is...

The one who hadn't fought, and yet won...

"Why... why'd you do such a thing?"

"Umm... to make up for being nosy?"

"You're kidding me..."

After the festival... two weeks after the school festival stage performance.

The two in the support band who gave it their all for the idol headed to the second music room as a substitute for the change room in the evening. And it was there that the two confirmed their feelings for one another.

... but in actuality, this embarrassing romance story had another hidden angle to it.

"I'm sorry, Kazusa. I'd embarrassed you at the time."

"Why are you apologizing... didn't you also like this guy?"

In actuality, only one side had conveyed their feelings to the other at the second music room being used as a locker room.

A girl kissing a sleeping guy as if to wake him using magic, only to run away embarrassed.

"Because you know... I believe the way we are now is the most important to us."

"Setsuna..."

Which was why right then and there, in order to correct such a story that wouldn't have an ending, there was another person there.

This nosy girl presented the guy who just awoke with a glass shoe, so that he would search for the girl with the other matching shoe.

"Because I believe the best thing is for the person you like best to be liked the best."

"... seems like you're using *"best"* quite a lot there."

"Haruki-kun might get mad with me using such messy Japanese."

And that is how these two girls, who were given the roles of the princess and the palace guard, could meet like this in the same futon...

"Why is it the two of us have to be with this kind of guy anyway...?"

"Heheh, you're right... why two girls as go~od as us, anyway~?"

"Why someone like this who'll only get a desk job?"

"Not at all, Haruki-kun will definitely move up! I'm sure he'll have  
become a manager  
a greater purpose!"

"... whichever it is, it doesn't sound so manly."

"Heheh, you're right."

"Well, I guess he's just the way he is, isn't he?"

And the two of them giggled, having forgotten where they were.

"Hey, Kazusa."

"Hmm?"

"Is it okay if I sleep here like this?"

"Hmm, I guess... sleeping alone is a bit cold."

"Ah, then, what about I also call over Haruki-kun?"

"... don't get too carried away, Setsuna."

"Is that because I'm messing around, or is it because I'm messing with your boyfriend?"

"..... good night!"

This was a dream.

This was a dream that Setsuna continued to wish for.

A dream that she would always wish for, never wanting to awaken from it.

Where the two be best friends and have nothing to hide from one another, worrying over a middle-school love.

As comrades who shared the same dream, forever swearing to be friends.

And surely, even more happier things would continue to build up...

"Good night."

But Setsuna knew the reality of it.

That this dream would not continue forever.

That this dream was far too ideal, that there was no such thing as never awakening from it.

"We're here."

"Yeah."

Those fun times passed in an instant.

... though one could say that, though the trip was an overnight stay, in the end it had to be finished in about 48 hours.

Driving an expensive foreign car that had more dents than before they started, Kazusa reached the house where Haruki lived.

"You're tired, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"I also want to get home, take a shower, and get some sleep."

"Guess I'll get one too... though I really liked such a big bath."

"What are you remembering, you pervert?"

"... don't try to make me remember."

Setsuna had already parted ways with them at her house about ten minutes ago.

She continued to wave her hand until they couldn't see her from the car.

As if she was an idiot who had so much fun on the trip.

... or perhaps, to resist the fact that she had gone from three people to  
a dream  
reality  
one person.

"See you, then."

"Yeah..."

And now, Haruki would get out of the car, ending it with such a short farewell.

"....."

"....."

Taking his traveling bag from the trunk, slowly carrying it on his back.

"....."

"....."

Waving lightly to the driver's seat, Kazusa would also lightly waved back, and depart.

"....."

"....."

The engine sound would gradually fade away, and the three's Christmas party would come to a close.

"... hurry up and go."

"You're, right."

Or it should have.

"....."

"....."

Haruki hadn't moved to step out of the car, failing to dissolve this group of two.

"Hey..."

"Yeah..."

No, in reality, that wasn't the first thing on his mind.

"It's fine, you don't have to worry."

"So you say."

"Just wave goodbye and go, it's not that big of a deal."

"So you have no other decisions other than that?"

"Don't joke around, why do I have to decide?"

"You know..."

Kazusa had stopped the car at this place about a minute ago.

Driving to the curb, holding down the brakes, releasing the clutch, switching the gear to neutral, pulling the side-brake, releasing her feet from both the clutch and brake pedals. And then...

Soon after releasing her right hand from the side brake, Haruki's left hand immediately grabbed it, entangling itself with it.

"Don't joke around..."

"Kazusa..."

The pianist remained tightly gripped with Haruki's hands, despite what she said.

Kazusa's hand was smooth, hard, warm, sweating, and faintly shivering, doing the exact opposite of what it was she asked.

"Then, then... if you don't plan on letting go..."

"... hmm?"

"Then come, here."

Haruki knew.

"If you don't plan on letting go... then come here."

That although Kazusa's words and actions didn't match up, they represented the real her.

He learned this when they crossed each other over the course of half a year. And within a month of being together.

"... why aren't you so independent, anyway? Can't even move yourself?"

"Then I might wave goodbye? And go home myself?"

"And... why are you such a cold-hearted guy?"

"I'm not at all... it's just..."

"Just...?"

"I'm that kind of hopeless guy who wants to see how you would react to whatever it is I do to you."

"Mmm..."

And the low odds that Haruki ran with had so easily struck jackpot, it was boring.

"Kazusa..."

"shaddup."

Kazusa got out of the driver's seat, and sat in the mantle of Haruki within the passenger seat.

Burying her head in his chest, the shivering from her body broke through from her skin through her sweater, and she remained that way, breathing heavily.

She was a like a dog who had been waiting for its prize for two days, only making sure of her master's scent, and as if it were leaving its scent on him.

"Kazusa... you smell good..."

Which was why she acted in earnest, though a bit like an animal, embracing him. Haruki acted like a human the entire way through... or rather, like the owner of a shepherd.

"... you're disgusting, Haruki."

"Well, I won't deny that."

... she acted in such a way that, no matter how much he gnawed on her hands to hide her embarrassment, she wouldn't be able to stop.

"Well, maybe to you it's disgusting. Maybe I look like a nerd."

"Come on... that's what I'm saying is really disgusting."

"That's why I'm not denying it."

"You thought there'd be a girl who'd be glad you'd say something like that?"

"No, not really..."

"That there'd be someone, other than me?"

And of course, it'd be habitual for her to be licking her own wounds shortly afterward.

"It's just me... I'm the only kind of girl who would..."

"Kazusa..."

To further impart her scent upon him, she put both her arms behind his neck and laid her hands on his shoulders, and his face pushed against her black hair.



"The way you're disgusting, strange, and miserable... despite it being all so revolting, I'm the only one who can understand you."

"Mmm..."

"So I'm the only one you can be with."

"Mmm...!"

Haruki also accepted Kazusa's intimacy, taking a deep whiff of the aroma from her hair.

Though the smell of soap from the bath last night had long faded away, the faint aura coming from Kazusa herself directly stimulated his brain, melting him away in such a pleasant feeling.

Because, he loved this scent of hers ever since meeting her in the spring.

"Ah~ geez, it's nauseating to be saying nothing but disgusting words."

"But even you're..."

"Both of us are so disgusting, it gives me the chills."

"Really, now..."

Their cheeks rubbed against one another as she continued to complain.

"I've got the chills..."

"Really?"

"Not just really... I'm telling you, I'm cold...!"

"So... don't be so spoiled like that."

Throwing unreasonable abuses at one another, they were face to face.

"I'm not!"

"Right, right, I get it, I get it. Then, I'm going home."

"You! ... nggh, nnggg!?"

He forcibly stole a kiss from the violent Kazusa right at the end, even though she shouldn't be resisting.

"Mmm, mmm..."

"Fuaa... a, angg.....mmmm, mwaa..."

And Kazusa felt this was the happiest she could be, closing her eyes and abandoning herself to him.

"A-Ahh... Haruki, h, ha, aah..."

Closing away her eyes and ears, with Haruki taking her lips...

She thought of nothing else, her mind blank, paying full attention on the harmony of their romance.

While praying that, in particular, she would not remember what that "girl" talked with her about last night.

To chase away that bitterness deep within her throat, this continued with the two tasting with the tip of their tongues...

"Mm, mm..."

"Mmph... a, haa..."

And eventually, their lips parted, as saliva drooped down.

"You're not cold anymore, are you?"

"No... I am."

"... Kazusa?"

Even though the two were in contact, even though their lips, cheeks, breaths, and even though they traded tongues with one another, the heat inside her should have built up.

"I'm cold, Haruki..."

"Why's that...?"

"Why, I wonder...?"

Even so, Kazusa was still not going to let go of him.

"Even though I'm this happy, even though it feels this good..."

Not only were her lips soaked, but so were her eyes.

"Even though, I should feel warm deep inside..."

Not only were her lips shivering, but so was her body.

"You're not cold, Haruki? You're not cold at all?"

"Well, I'm... feeling rather hot..."

His bewilderment even reached to her.

She was in such a hurry that she didn't fill in the gaps within her feelings.

Just now, she noticed that she was the only one who sought that "conclusion".

"I see, so you're feeling hot, Haruki..."

— *Why am I okay with this kind of guy?*

*Why do I end up feeling like not giving him up?*

*How could anyone else want this guy, this guy, this guy...*

Kazusa reasoned with herself in her mind over and over.

To cool down this coldness burdening her mind that could burn away at her.

*"Not at all, Haruki-kun will definitely move up! I'm sure he'll have a greater purpose!"*

"...!"

Even so, no matter how much she struggled to slow herself down...

— *Why would that kind of girl like him?*

*Why would her of all people, like him, you know...?*

Those words that yearn, yet carry no maliciousness.

A transparent voice, mischievous from its lack of sincerity.

They would continue to lead her mind around and around...

"Ah..."

Which was why in the end, she strongly hung herself around him, more than before.

"I'm cold... or rather, the exact opposite."

However, Haruki could feel the weight of her body more and more.

He could feel how childish her lies were, the tantrum she has as a child.

He could feel, what it was that she sought.

"S-So you see..."

"Kazusa..."

She was at ease reaching this far.

She would have been better saying it was "the two of them within the group of three".

However, this was where things split apart.

*"It'll always be the three of us."*

Even though she could protect the oath she made a day ago by not stepping backward like she was right now...

*"But, but you know... I'm, fine with the three of us."*

"I want you to cool down this heat within me..."

Her instinct awakened, being someone else to say those words having the same meaning.

Did she whisper this to abide by her own lust?

Or was it a warning of the danger she faced?

Or rather, that both of them...

"And in return, I'll cool you down as well... Haruki..."

"Kazu, sa..."

—*I'm the worst.*

Because, just like that...

Kazusa had easily broken the vow she made with Setsuna.

Even though the two had been so close a day ago. Even though the two had fooled around that much a day ago.

—*But... being the worst is fine.*

... no, that was precisely why.

She could sense a charm coming from Setsuna as a girl far so much, that she had to betray her.

Because, she could end up liking Setsuna that much.

She could feel that charm of hers so much.

It made her want to be with Setsuna that much...

And it was because she feared that the three of them would remain that way.

"I'll just warn you, I'm not as straight on as you think I am."

"It's because you refuse things like that well in advance that you're so straight on..."

And, as Kazusa expected...

At the end of it all, Haruki would listen to her selfishness as a "lover".

While doing so, he'd certainly think hard of how the three of them can remain together.

— *He's mine.*

*He's only mine, he won't go anywhere else...*

"Even if you say it hurts, I won't stop..."

"Like I will..."

Which was why, she let Haruki handle everything else.

All she had to do was let him do whatever it is that he pleased...

— *This is fine, right Setsuna...?*

*You've already recognized what the two of us are, right?*

*So, you won't have a problem with this, right...?*

"It hurts, Haruki..."

"Still, that's great. Then it'll be the four of us."

"We're going to be university students anyway, though it is such a pain anyhow."

It was January.

Three days passed by in an instant, and so did the coming of the third term.

However, those days were filled with people who thought only about graduating and going into university.

"Well, it's been hell. Takeya-kun still hasn't picked what program he's going into."

"Ahh, that's um... pause a bit."

"Pause?"

It was late in the afternoon when everyone was already headed home. For Haruki and Setsuna, who went with the recommendation of "*already deciding to go onto university*", they began thinking about what their school life would be starting in April.

"Well, I uncovered some rather interesting info... can you promise not to tell anyone?"

"S-Sure..."

"He's been planning to go into the same program as I."

"Eh...?"

"That's why I'm telling you he's been quite worried over it."

"I-Is that so?"

"Well, I would probably say something like "*so what?*"

"....."

"Those guys sure are..... what's wrong, Setsuna?"

"Fuee? Eh, ah... nothing. Why?"

"Well, the usual you would have been more tense and say things like... *"Hey, hey, those two might be able to get something going~"*, you know?"

"Ah, n... I, I'm not gonna say something like I'm an outsider~"

"I guess... well, when you put it that way Setsuna, you're right."

".....!"

"... you really seem a bit strange today, Setsuna."

Again... it was January.

Three days had gone by, as well as the time the three had spent together. While enveloped within memories of their third year, they were in a hurry but wanted to spend the rest of their time well, with only a little ways to go to graduation.

That was something all three of them had wished on... or rather, should have been.

"Well then, see you tomorrow."

"Ah, umm, you know..."

"Hmm?"

Exiting the school gates, passing through the Minamisuetsugu station's shopping district, by the side of the park, and into the residential area.

Having always taken the exact same path to Setsuna's house and reaching it, it was already evening.

"You don't have to send me home anymore, you know."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't take long to get home, just like during the school festival."

"There a school regulation that says you shouldn't take such a perfect route back home?"

"But you have to detour around, Haruki-kun."

"Don't underestimate the walking power of the go-home club. I can even walk all the way to Onjuku."



"And..... Kazusa isn't here."

"..... how many times are you gonna repeat that, Setsuna?"

Entering the year, one of the other conditions for this one other exam taker to enter music college, was to indulge herself in study preparations, cutting into her attendance.

"As many times, you know. Because Kazusa's doing her best on her own."

"I know. I call her every day."

"But so do I..."

It's been half a month since the competition, when she started training for 16 hours in an intensive training course. Even the *"verbal abuse hurled at Haruki"* during telephone calls had dropped a bit.

"See? The three of us are together, right? You don't have to worry about a thing."

"But..."

"You really aren't yourself today, Setsuna..."

"Because..."

—*It really is strange.*

*He and I aren't even going out, you know?*

*If it isn't the three of us... if Kazusa isn't with us, this won't hold, you know?*

"You don't like going home with me?"

"Not at all!"

"Or do you think I'm just being too nosy?"

"You wouldn't be Haruki-kun otherwise!"

"... I can take that as a compliment, right?"

"Ah, sorry..."

It was as if Setsuna hadn't realized she'd been using the wrong words, formally apologizing.

And in turn, she also thought of the possibility he'd been looking down on how she had realized that...

"Anyway, Setsuna!"

"Y-Yes!?"

"You know what, I'll send you home tomorrow too! You'll definitely wait for me, right?"

"Eh? Eh?"

And, Haruki forcibly settled things while Setsuna was still thinking.

"The library again, right? Once I've finished with my stuff I'll come meet you there."

Always continuing on at this pace, Setsuna ended up being dragged down with his talking, and already knew full well this was what would happen at the end...

"A-Ahaha... then, I'll see you tomorrow too."

And in the end, the two parted ways as always.

"All right, then see you tomorrow."

"Okay... goodbye."

Not rejecting the "face" they presented, but speaking their "motives".

*"I absolutely won't let you be by yourself, Ogiso!"*

When Setsuna saw Haruki running off from behind, she felt as if she could see that crucifix she burdened upon him.

But even now, she still wanted to believe in that curse.

"Five... thirty-two PM."

It'd taken them twenty-two minutes from the school gates.

That's how long it'd taken her for walking at ease, when it would have taken her fifteen minutes on her own.

Even though there was no reason for her to be at school that late, as always he'd have odd things to deal with. She'd kill time at the library and lie, claiming she had "*things to read up on*", and end up with a total of twenty-two minutes.

"Seven minutes... over..."

She knew that she was contradicting what she had said just a while ago...

Even so, Setsuna had a sweet tooth for the reality of spending a little more time than usual with him.

"I see... so in the end, you four will be going into social sciences?"

"Yeah. Haruki-kun said that nothing would change from when we were in the attached school."

Night.

It was about 10 PM, having finished dinner, relaxing for a bit with the family, taking a bath, and returning to her room.

And for thirty minutes, Setsuna would be dedicating the time to talking with Kazusa.

Because that was the rule the three friends agreed with, so Kazusa could win the competition.

"Oh man, you guys sure are having a blast. I just finished with exam studies, and yet I'm at the last part of all this too."

"Then maybe you should have been working hard for the past three years? No last minute cramming, but drumming away like Haruki-kun."

"... cut me some slack. Like I can live like that at all."

Usually Setsuna would talk for three or four hours just fine, but she complied with these thirty minutes.

Though it's obvious to say it wasn't to get into Kazusa's practice time... it was to  
the lovebirds  
not cut into the time past 10:30 that Haruki and Kazusa would spend.

"Ahaha, but you know, you have to *"live like that"* from now on, right?"

"Like I care."

"Ah~, is it okay saying that?"

"Besides, from now on you're going to end up spending more time with him, aren't you?"

"Eh...!?"

"Ah, well..."

"Kazusa..."

At that moment, the complaint that Kazusa carelessly mumbled was as if it had no logic to it, not having a word that even connected with the conversation.

"W-Well... because you, the club president, and Mizusawa will all be going to the same university, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

Setsuna was glad she didn't get mad all of a sudden. Or she was glad she didn't laugh.

"Even though it's not at all similar to the attached school, I'm not going to be there."

Even so, losing words to say to such meaningless things, she continued the conversation.

"T-Then, Kazusa can also go to somewhere close. Tomioka Music University's just one bus away. And it's a sister university to Houjou too..."

"No way in hell... that place has nothing but music school students."

"... ah~"

She continued the conversation that had no clear ending.

She continued the conversation that stepped on landmines she had no idea would explode or not.

"Well, have fun there. I'm gonna be spending quite a boring university life being soaked in the piano for the next four years."

"Kazusa~, you don't have to be so nervous. We can meet during the weekends or during the summer holidays. And you can talk with Haruki-kun over the phone every day."

"You don't really have to comfort me. I reap what I sow."

"Are you anxious? About not being with him?"

"Well, not really..."

It was quite obvious that "*not really*" was not really the case. Trying to tough it out, the impatience and lack of sincerity oozed out from her voice.

"Ah, that's it!"

"What?"

"Kazusa, you're worried that he might end up getting someone else?"

"W-Wha!?"

"Then it'll be fine, just leave it to me!"

Which was why Setsuna spoke out in a triumphant voice more than necessary, forcibly moving the topic...

"What are you talking about, Setsuna? When did I say something that miserable?"

"But you see, we're going to the same program, so I'll keep an eye on him. And if anything suspicious happens, I'll give you a call."

"I'm telling you, I didn't ask for that. Or rather, there's no need to do that with him."

"Ah, that's it... I could keep others away by pretending to be his girlfriend..."

"I'm telling you no!"

"!?"

And then... it had finally awoken.

The fear that slept within the depths of Kazusa's heart.

"Ah... t-that's not... that didn't mean, anything..."

That shout of Kazusa's left no further room for that one foolishness of hers.

Setsuna knew that far too well.

"I-I'm sorry... I meant to joke, but that was unforgivable..."

"I'm telling you, that's not it! That's not what I meant!"

"....."

It was as if it was drilled into her who it was that was taking away from Kazusa's time.

"Well, I gotta go..."

"Okay..."

The clock in the room read 10:22... it was ten minutes too soon for them to end now.

In the end, the two couldn't really bring back their conversation until the end.

Setsuna couldn't selfishly change the topic to something comfortable. And Kazusa's affectionate ill-mannered tongue remained in the shadows, her actions and words continuing to diverge.

"... good night."

"Ah, wait, Kazusa!"

"Hmm?"

"It's okay for me to call you tomorrow too, right?"

"....."

"Kazusa..."

"Please... at this time, if you can."

"S-Sure!"

But at the end, breathing a sigh of relief, she was saved by the promise of speaking to her again next time.

"..... haa..."

Closing her cellphone, Setsuna stared up at the ceiling.

"Ah..."

However, it was a failure.

And the reason for that, was that looking up was not to deceive herself at all.

"A-Aah..."

About the reality of that white ceiling and the shining fluorescent lamp had begun to blur.

About the reality that she couldn't hold herself in any longer.

"...!"

Let alone her tears.

—*Even though we had sworn together.*

*Even though the three of us had made such a strong oath.*

*I thought it would continue on forever...*

"Uu... u, uu..."

The one thing that Setsuna asked for.

That the three of them be together.

That the two of them would keep the three together...

"Geez... maybe this isn't gonna work anymore...?"

Which was why that at some point, the three would never be able to recover.



# 5

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Date : 2/3 12:26  
From : Ogiso Setsuna  
Subject : Re: Where are you?

I'm sorry, I'm at home right now.

Seems I caught a bit of a cold...

Date : 2/3 12:30  
From : Haruki-kun  
Subject : You okay?

How much of a fever is it? Did you take  
your medicine? Did you go to the hospital?

Anyone with you at home?

Maybe I should come and visit.

Date : 2/3 12:35  
From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : I'm okay!

It's just a bit of a fever. But my mom is here so it's fine.

Instead, cheer on Kazusa in my place, Haruki-kun!

Date : 2/3 12:38

From : Haruki-kun

Subject : Re: I'm okay!

All right, take care.

Even if I do, it'd be quiet so she won't hear it.

Date : 2/3 12:40

From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Re: I'm okay!

What time is her performance?

Date : 2/3 12:44  
From : Haruki-kun  
Subject : Umm...

She's #19, so probably at the end.  
I think she'll come up around 4 PM.

Date : 2/3 12:49  
From : Ogiso Setsuna  
Subject : Re: Umm...

I see... looks like it'll be a while

Date : 2/3 12:55  
From : Haruki-kun  
Subject : It's gonna be a while

I'm entering the hall so I'll text you

later.

I'll let you know what the results are.

Date : 2/3 12:57

From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Re: It's gonna be a while

Hang in there, Kazusa!

Date : 2/3 12:58

From : Haruki-kun

Subject : Re: It's gonna be a while

Tell her that yourself...

Date : 2/3 12:59

From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Re: It's gonna be a while

That'd be bad when she's so focused~

Date : 2/3 16:20  
From : Haruki-kun  
Subject : Just finished

Waiting for Kazusa outside the assembly hall.

Date : 2/3 16:24  
From : Ogiso Setsuna  
Subject : How was it

Did she win!? She get a prize?

Date : 2/3 16:30  
From : Haruki-kun  
Subject : Re: How was it

Only the top five were announced and her name didn't come up...

Date : 2/3 16:31  
From : Ogiso Setsuna  
Subject : I see...

Kazusa worked so hard...

Date : 2/3 16:36  
From : Haruki-kun  
Subject : Re: I see...

But she made it to the finals, so she got the conditions for her recommendation done, so I guess she doesn't feel too bad?

Date : 2/3 16:39  
From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Re: I see...

Give Kazusa my regards

Date : 2/3 16:41

From : Haruki-kun

Subject : Roger

I'm gonna meet up with Kazusa and then come  
to see you.

Date : 2/3 16:44

From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Don't

Don't, this season is important to  
Kazusa, don't let her catch my cold!

Date : 2/3 16:46

From : Haruki-kun

Subject : Re: Don't

Oh yeah, sorry. Then just me.

I'll probably be there around 6 PM.

Date : 2/3 16:47

From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Re: Don't

No, it's fine. I'm gonna sleep now

Date : 2/3 16:50

From : Haruki-kun

Subject : Re: Don't

I see, take care.

Date : 2/3 16:53



From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Good work

Be together with Kazusa

Tell her she did great

And make sure she doesn't feel bad

Date : 2/3 16:58

From : Haruki-kun

Subject : Re: Good work

All right, will do.

You should also contact her when you get  
better, Setsuna.

Take care.

Date : 2/3 16:53

From : Ogiso Setsuna

Subject : Good night

Okay, I'll mail you tonight

Good night

Date : 2/3 22:21

From : Kazusa

Subject : Re: Good work

This is what I'm capable of

It's a miracle I made it to the finals

Date : 2/3 22:25

From : Setsuna

Subject : Re: Good work

Still, I really wanted to hear your  
performance, Kazusa~

I'm really sorry I couldn't come.

Date : 2/3 22:35  
From : Kazusa  
Subject : Re: Good work

You had a cold so it can't be helped

Date : 2/3 22:39  
From : Setsuna  
Subject : Re: Good work

In any case, next is the recommendation  
exam. Good luck!

Date : 2/3 22:46  
From : Kazusa  
Subject : Re: Good work

Don't call it an exam

It makes me depressed

Date : 2/3 22:49  
From : Setsuna  
Subject : Re: Good work

Ahaha, good luck~

Well then, I should be getting some sleep

Date : 2/3 22:53  
From : Kazusa  
Subject : Re: Good work

Yeah, good night

Date : 2/3 23:23  
From : Kazusa  
Subject : Hey

You were the farthest back on the left on  
the second level, weren't you?

Date : 2/3 23:25  
From : Setsuna  
Subject : Re: Hey

I'm sorry...

Please don't tell Haruki-kun

Date : 2/3 23:31  
From : Kazusa  
Subject : Re: Hey

I'm also sorry

I think I know why you did that, Setsuna  
Like it's for me, or because of me, right

Date : 2/3 23:35

From : Kazusa  
Subject : Re: Hey

I know I should have kept quiet, sorry  
Just... I wanted to thank you for coming

Date : 2/4 0:11  
From : Setsuna  
Subject : Sorry

It was amazing, Kazusa  
I cried  
I dunno why, but it really was so  
amazing...

"Umm, Setsuna...!"

"....."

"... is Ogiso-san here?"

"It's always been Setsuna this and Setsuna that every day. Why hide it now?"

"Whichever it is, you sure don't seem to be in a good mood..."

The bell signaling the end of classes hadn't stopped yet. Greeting Haruki as he entered class was an atmosphere that had long lost its purpose in student life, warming the cold winter that the classmates endured.

"Ogiso-chan's already gone home."

"Ah, really...?"

Setsuna

But, the one person who Haruki sought was no longer there.

"Well, I guess she really didn't want to see you."

"Setsuna avoiding me...? Why?"

"Because it's you, after all!"

Ignoring the mocking criticism from his classmate, Haruki once again looked around the corners of the room. Confirming she wasn't here at all, he gave a sigh.

"Why... I wonder?"

Even though it was Friday, this entire week he hadn't gotten to speak a word with Setsuna.

Recently... or rather, ever since she had caught a cold from a week prior, in other words, since Kazusa's competition, Setsuna had grown distant.

Even the morning, she had barely gotten to school, contrasting with Haruki who got in class first.

Even during recess or lunch, she hadn't once left her classroom.

And when it came time to head home, before Haruki came to see her, she'd slip past the entrance while the homeroom bell rang, and make haste for the school gates.

Haruki would always walk up to the seat closest to the window and glance outside to see her. It was a situation where he was eager to run down the hallways and break school regulations...

"Sigh...!?"

Nothing coming to mind, the moment he gave as if to show bewilderment...

He suddenly felt two light taps of a fingertip on his shoulder.

"Setsuna...!?"

"... who else do you think would be around here right now?"

"Hiff haatts haat you fink, henn honn't hoo hat... (If that's what you think, then don't do that)"

He spat to his <sup>Takeya</sup> *"self-proclaimed best friend"*, who stuck his index finger into Haruki's cheek.

"Haa, haa, haa...!"

Jumping to the entrance having sprinted down the hallway passed the students looking over in confusion, Setsuna finally... or rather, having used up all her strength, took quite some time to catch her breath as she put her hands on her knees.



"H, haa, haa, haa... haaaaa....!"

She didn't feel like her heart was going to leap out just because of her running.

Probably it was because of the emotions that went into her desperate attempt to run.

Anxiety, fear, grief... as well as the hope that she mustn't have, and that hope would bring about the despair of betrayal.

Those complicated emotions were mixed in, which made it harder for Setsuna to breathe easily.

"Haa... fuuu..."

Even so, she managed to regain her footing, and she once again bent forward as if to pull out a loose screw within her.

It was too soon for her to be calm...

She'd be truly at ease if she wasn't in this public area, escaping through the school gates, entering the residential area, and closed the door at her home...

"You're bad at running. Maybe you should start skiing to build stamina this year?"

... or, so she thought.

"W... why?"

"Don't underestimate someone who's a former basketball club regular."

"What do you mean regular... you're the captain, aren't you...!"

"Well, in any case, I'd be able to shrug off Haruki easily, Setsuna."

She'd just started getting ready to head home after having rushed from her classroom...

Being able to keep the same distance and speed while running without breaking a sweat, Io gave a sigh while smiling.

"It's been a while since you played the guitar. Ever since the school festival I guess?"

"I suppose..."

The sun coming in from the west seeped into the first music room, leaving a subtle illumination on Haruki and Takeya.

The formation of the light music club, its gathering of members that didn't really practice correctly, the discord that came with the recruitment of a female vocalist, and its dissolution...

As if he wanted to slowly make sure, Haruki began playing a new song not in his repertoire, in this place the two were in that left with somewhat unpleasant memories.

"Wonder if we should reform when we enter university...?"

"Planning on making a debut at the university festival?"

"I really don't want to rush such a group so quickly now, I want to prepare a bit more in advance... you wanna join, Takeya?"

"Suddenly looking ahead even though you've gotten this terrible."

"... 'shaddup, you idiot."

The song Haruki played was something he first heard from an online video site.

It seemed like a theme song from a game, late night drama, or anime, but he didn't quite know the details, nor did he look into it.

But its beauty came from its fleeting melody and lyrics, always remaining within his mind.

"So, what do you want? You did come all the way here."

"Seems Setsuna-chan hates you."

"...!"

He'd planned on perfectly playing this despite having gotten worse, but the careful words Takeya said had made his fingers slip in an instant.

"Well, recently she's been avoiding me altogether... in any case, it's a good sign for the other third-year guys, isn't it?"

"Setsuna's also busy... with graduation, going to university, preparing for various things..."

"She's also been hanging out with me just fine. We also went to the coffee shop and chatted for three hours... well, of course there was one other person."

"...!"

Afterward, he kept on missing his notes. The noise beside him was far too much, and not having grasped the melody ahead of him, Haruki helplessly put away the guitar.

"Well~ it's fine and dandy, isn't it?"

"What's fine with this...?"

"Because you have someone <sup>a girlfriend</sup> who doesn't hate you."

"....."

"She's real cute. Fallen so hard for you that she can only see you, you know."

"Though... she's always hated me this whole time."

"Hey, Haruki, you know what tsundere means, right?"

"She's not one to simply change her personality like that. It's more complicated. One moment she's laughing, and the next moment she's all angry, it's ridiculously difficult."

"... it would seem that you understood exactly what the word meant. Diligent as always."

At the time, the girl to Haruki was not an unknown creature to him. Since they met, she'd ignore him, easily get angry, often get annoyed, and every so often pay attention to him.

And right now, indeed she'd suddenly get angry and often get annoyed, but Kazusa would always pay attention to him...

To Haruki after all, the unknown part of her hadn't changed.

"Anyways, we aren't talking about Kazusa..."

"Then how about Setsuna-chan? She hasn't hated you at all up until now? Did you figure out everything about her?"

"..... no."

Since meeting that girl, she was very sociable, easily laugh, was in high spirits, and very rarely would she pout...

And right now, indeed she'd easily laugh and was in high spirits, but Setsuna had a rather tearful expression that tried to hide another emotion she had...

"Hey, Takeya..."

"What?"

"Girls are complicated, aren't they?"

"I know a simpler way to get along with them. Want me to teach you?"

"... what do you mean?"

"Once you've decided, go straight ahead. Don't show any lingering regrets. Don't throw away your hopes."

"... what's that, exactly?"

"You don't get it?"

"Nope, not at all."

Haruki scowled at Takeya with a discouraged expression on his face, as if to show he had completely understood it.

"... huh, Haruki did?"

"Maybe... I wonder."

The sun coming in from the west seeped across the rooftop, leaving a subtle illumination on Setsuna and Io.

The wind, though not cold, came in strong, as if it was waiting to darken the skies even now.

The sound of it was awkward, and somehow it felt as if it had sympathy for Setsuna right now.

"Sorry for calling you up here like this."

"It's fine, I didn't really have anything to do..."

"Then why'd you run so fast...?"

"T-There's a TV program I wanted to see~ that I remembered!"

Io lowered her eyes a bit, noticing Setsuna's hands as they gripped the wire fence hard, the feelings in them shaking far more violently than the words that came from her mouth.

"... hey."

"W-What is it?"

"Setsuna... what's your plan from now on?"

"From now on...? Geez, it's been several days since the exams were finished. But, I dunno about skiing... ah, but if there's hot springs or a karaoke..."

"I'm not asking you about graduating or where you plan to graduate."

"T-Then, what do you exactly mean...?"

Only now did Io realize she had the wrong idea about Setsuna.

She thought she was someone who wouldn't lie.

"Are you going to continue that whole *"always the three of us"* thing?"

"I don't want you to call it a *"thing"*... you make it sound stupid."

And she thought she was someone who understood a bit better... and knew when to quit.

"Well, it is stupid in a way. It's like playing house."

"I wonder what it is you understand, Io..."

Setsuna's wavering voice struggled to shrug Io off with a cold shoulder.

Setsuna's swaying eyes tried hard to look down on Io.

She tried to believe she was higher than all of this.

"You've never once practiced with us, stayed up all night with us, and never went up on stage with us..."

"If you're gonna go that far, then what you're doing is half-assed!"

"...!"

"If Touma-san's around, you won't get closer to Haruki. That's all the more reason you've been running away like this..."

"Io..."

"Is this shying away of yours what you call a *"festival of three who will continue on forever"*? That's not something I can accept at all!"

Certainly, Io was stubborn in denying it.

What turned Io's words a little more wild just now, was not that Setsuna's stubbornness had ticked her off...

But perhaps it was because she was dissatisfied with this one girl who, for a tiny bit, did her best in this group of three.

"And what is it you know about us anyway?"

Haruki's wavering voice gave Takeya the cold shoulder...

"... I'll just have you know, I haven't said anything like I'm not your best buddy or anything, right?"

"I know that."

... so he thought, but Haruki didn't have the courage to follow through.

"It has to do with you, and not to do with Kazusa and Setsuna, something like that, right? It's the exact opposite..."

"Yeah... even if the three of you stick together, there's a secret between the two of you that you won't tell one other."

"Then what is it that you..."

"You stayed at Touma's, didn't you? From the Sunday... after the competition."

"...!"

Even though his reasoning and cautiousness had been propped up by his three years, and he'd struggled to balance it all for the past half year...

"Thought I wouldn't pick up on something like that? If you didn't want anyone to find out, you shouldn't have come to school on Monday."

That day, Haruki acted rather suspiciously, and although he did his best to try and hide it, he could tell from how ruffled he had looked.

"Since when did this start? ... never mind, it wouldn't matter if I had asked about how it was you two ended up *"like this"*."

Two years ago, the way Takeya acted was exactly the same, attending school after having come from a girl's room for the first time.

"Well... she's gonna be real busy with the recommendation entrance exams. So, we weren't gonna see each other for a while."

"Sounds like something that no one else should care about, right?"

"....."

Takeya's words were what a best friend would keep throwing at Haruki.

"Sounds like something that is especially not important to Setsuna-chan, right? The two of you are starting a brand new life, right?"

"About Setsuna..."

"You don't want me to tell her? Because I don't have a clue, I shouldn't be spouting my mouth off?"

Which was why Haruki fully understood what he said.

That he was still treating him as a best friend.

And that he truly cared for him from the bottom of his heart.

"I'll... I'll tell her."

And if that was the case, then Haruki wasn't one to always follow what his best friend said.

Because of the one pride he still had left...

He at least protected his "sincerity to others".



"What you're doing is half-assed, Setsuna. It's all over the place."

"It's... not..."

"You plan to be like this when you enter university? You're gonna see him every day! You'll end up spending more time with him than even now!"

The sun had disappeared.

Blocked out by the clouds in the sky, the winds grew even more cold...

"Maybe I should change programs..."

Setsuna's emotions changed in the same color and manner.

"You okay with that?"

"I was never good with social sciences in the first place. I was better off with English anyway..."

"That's not what I'm asking you about... well, that has a certain meaning to it."

"What do you mean...?"

"Because, Setsuna, you planned on going to English in the first place... before deciding to go with Haruki."

"~~~!!"

But Setsuna couldn't feel the iciness she wanted from those clouds, from those winds.

"Messing up your own wishes to be with someone, and then part ways with them in the end. You okay with that?"

"H... Haruki-kun wouldn't...!"

"Of course he wouldn't say that... I didn't say you were doing this for yourself, but that you were doing this for Haruki."

"I-I'm sorry... I'm sorry!"

Realizing what she had tried to cover up in the depths of her heart just slipped out, her body had boiled over.

"Hey, just stop this... this isn't what the girl, Ogiso Setsuna, would do."

"Io..."

"You're regretting this, aren't you? It's painful to be together as the three of you, isn't it? That's why you ran away, not knowing what to do, right?"

The cat was out of the bag.

"Because you want to be together. Because you like Haruki."

Each and every one of the unpleasant feelings she had leaked out.

"Not as the three of you... but the two of you."

"No..."

"What do you mean no?"

Even though these beautiful clouds had went out of their way to cover her...

"I'm not that pure or earnest at all..."

"I want both of them, really, both of them..."

"I'm... I'm that greedy..."

It dirtied her in black, as trampling mud that spread itself in front of her.

"Hey, Haruki... you should stop calling her *"Setsuna"*."

"But you've been calling her *"Setsuna-chan"*!"

"There's a difference between you and I. Yours has far more meaning, it's totally different."

Takeya's words were what a best friend would keep throwing at Haruki.

Even so, no, maybe it was because of that...

Because of that, right now, those were the words that he didn't want to hear at all.

"Then, Haruki, I want to check one more thing... who do you really like?"

"That, that's..... Kazusa..."

"Yeah... figures."

"But, even Setsuna's an important..."

"Friend, right?"

"....."

"Both of them are really precious to you. One is your girlfriend and the other's your friend... you know this is bad."

He didn't want to tie up the girl named Setsuna with such generic words like "*friend*".

From someone he looked for to an acquaintance, and from an acquaintance to a companion. And from a companion... to someone in a group of three.

She was a special girl, who revealed her true character as their relationship strengthened. And when she did reveal her true character, she grew more and more charming...

"You think treating Setsuna-chan like that wouldn't hurt her? ... you think not treating her like that wouldn't hurt Touma?"

Even if Setsuna, who wrapped herself in particular emotions, happened to wrap herself in such unpleasant feelings, there was no way he could avoid her at all.

"If you're going to, it'd be better to do so in a clearer way."

"But, Setsuna'll get hurt... she'll be hurt even more, being dropped out of the group of three."

"If either of them is going to be hurt... who would be hurt the least?"

"That's..."

"Would you do that, or do you plan to remain a half-dead trio...?"

Haruki knew the answer Takeya wanted him to give.

And probably, that answer would have been that of the majority.

"It'll be the three of us... that's what Setsuna wanted."

And Haruki understood the answer he gave was indeed that of the minority.

"And what will come out of protecting that to the very end? Both Setsuna-chan and Touma, everyone will get hurt. Even you..."

"Why can't it be the three of us? I just can't accept that!"

But, it couldn't be helped.

Because, he felt the charm from Setsuna that made him cling to that wrong answer.

"Because... that'd be killing our friendship!"

Because he had liked seeing her, trying hard as she may to wipe away her past, yet not being able to, feeling down, struggling, and trying hard again with a tearful smile on her face.

*— I was fine with Haruki-kun, the class president.*

*I liked him lecturing me. I had fun when he scolded me.*

*It didn't matter if he were my boyfriend, or just a friend.*

*I thought that if he treated other girls the same way, then it'd be fine.*

*— I like the way he usually is.*

*He'd usually say good morning, and usually say farewell.*

*He'd usually listen to what I have to say, and usually persuade me...*

*The way he usually holds me in such good light felt very pleasant.*

*Not like the way other guys had treated me,*

*But, the way he made me a bit nervous made me happy.*

*— I'd be lying to say that I hadn't wanted to go out with a guy.*

*But it did happen during middle school, and it was a bit scary.*

*Because, it was my dream to be with a guy who was so direct, yet so gentle.*

*Even though he had a bit of pride in him, it probably was "just about right".*

*— But Kazusa has such different values from me...*

*She never accepted the fact that Haruki-kun was a class president who was kind to anyone.*

*He couldn't leave anyone alone.*

*How should I put it... the way I say it could make Kazusa angry, though.*

*She sees him as a Prince Charming that she'd always wanted, just for her.*

*And, and you know... as Kazusa wished for, he became her Prince Charming.*

*Becoming her Prince Charming, thinking of her as the damsel...*

*Haruki had picked not the girl everyone admired as an idol, but the girl everyone treated like thin air.*

He picked not the girl who he treated normally, but the girl he treated as an idol.

Which was why Setsuna, who held feelings for Haruki, was in such a dilemma, because the way he treated her in particular was so painful.

—*I can't win against Kazusa.*

*Not that I want to win, but I won't ever win...*

*No one can rival someone so direct like her.*

To Setsuna, Kazusa was someone with such different qualities.

Because she was a girl who had this impossible balance; the narrow-mindedness of a grade schooler, the romance of a middle schooler, and the sincerity of an adult.

And because Setsuna was a bit more grown up than Kazusa.

—*And, I don't want to fight her.*

*Because, I'm like Kazusa, having liked him just the same amount as her...*

*And I wanted him to like me the same amount that he liked her.*

But Setsuna realized.

That she wasn't "*a bit more*" of an adult than Kazusa.

That her feelings weren't all that much different from Kazusa.

Kazusa wanted to be number one in his eyes.

Setsuna too, wanted to be number one in his eyes.

And she realized that in the end, whoever ends up not being number one will be hurt...

—*I won't call him "Haruki-kun" anymore.*

*I'm no longer a girl that he can call "Setsuna".*

*But I don't want to call him "Kitahara-kun" now.*

*And if he called me "Ogiso", the tears wouldn't stop.*

*Which was why I can't meet him.*

*I don't know how I should call him, or how he should call me...*

"I promised her."

"Haruki..."

"I promised her that I wouldn't leave her alone, that I wouldn't break our friendship..."

He picked up the guitar that he had once put away.

"No matter what happens, that's a promise I have to keep..."

"Even if Touma should get hurt, right?"

"....."

Placing it on his knee, he lightly strummed.

It was a bit harsh for his slightly numb hand from going strong into the string.

But for the time being, he didn't feel that much pain.

Though it was a bit modest, it wasn't anything compared to the pain he'd been causing the girls...

"Hey, Takeya."

"Hmm?"

"Am I doing the right thing?"

"Who knows."

"What should I do?"

"Don't ask me."

His fingers started moving quickly, changing from a monotonous sound to a melody.

"... pulling your leg. I'm kidding. Leave it to me."

"Takeya...?"

"Ah, well... putting it that way could leave a misunderstanding. Leave it to me and lo."

"What do you..."

"There's no need to rush... let's start off with a group of five, shall we?"

It was the song he played just a while ago.

A fleeting song, whose melody and lyrics that matched the cold season.

"Once Touma's recommendation goes in, let's all go skiing."

"Skiing, huh?"

"We'll all have a blast, go see the snow, get drunk, go to the hot springs..."

"That's..."

"Something that's fine as long as it's the three of you, right? As long as no one within within your trio is left out, right?"

The snow, alcohol, hot springs, and, that vow...

He strummed violently as if to erase the memories that went around in his head.

"Then, it's decided. Leave all the details to us. I'll call you when we've worked it out."

"You know, if you spend all that time dealing with us, you'll lose out on time to date girls."



"... I like spending time in a group of five far more than being alone with just a girl."

"....."

"Anyways, let's look forward to April, Haruki."

The skies outside the window were so gloomy and depressing, it seemed like it was going to snow even now.

"Five of us...?"

"We'll be there, Setsuna. Me, and Takeya."

"Io..."

Let your feelings flow, Setsuna.

Let your tears flow, Setsuna.

Let it come out slowly, and wither away quietly now.

That was what Io whispered to her.

"So, just call him *"Haruki-kun"* like you always have. Let him call you *"Setsuna"* like he always has."

"I-Is that okay...?"

"But you know, it doesn't have to have such a deep meaning anymore."

The same thing Takeya told Haruki...

Or rather, it'd been the first time in three years that the two settled on this kind of plan on their own.

"And it's fine if Haruki's there, right? It's fine if Touma-san's there, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"So, Setsuna... you can stop now."

"....."

"... okay?"

"..... o-o-o-kay...!"

Setsuna hesitated so much, it took her several seconds just to reply with that one word.

"I'll stop... I'll stop already... I won't say I want the three of us, anymore...!"

"Setsuna..."

"So please... don't tell Kazusa, don't tell Haruki-kun, how I feel...!"

"Like I would... besides, we're best friends, right?"

"Uuu, uuu... uaaaahhh...!"

And that tearful face of hers finally crumpled up.

"Oh boy... who'll believe you're the school idol like this?"

"Uuu, uuu... uaaaahhh...!"

Setsuna's tears again fell.

This time it wasn't as simple as her sobbing, but she cried out as if to dry her throat out.

"Ueeaahhhh, lo, l.... uaahhhhhh~!"

But those were no longer tears of regret...

They were tears that looked forward, swearing never to look back.

"Setsuna... you'll become an even better woman. A perfect idol that no man wouldn't look away from."

Even if she desperately clung onto the group of three.

Even if the three ends up as a group of two.

Even if she runs away from the two, and ends up alone.

Because to Setsuna, it was all a distant memory now.

The melody of the guitar echoed to the rooftop.

It was a song that spoke of a forbidden love, an unrequited love... and of growth.

The snow began to faintly fall, as if attracted to that fleeting sound.

*Though I may be hurt a bit, wait for it to heal, and then hurt yet again...*

*If it continues, I may slowly become an adult.*

Setsuna prayed to the snow with that wish of hers.

—*I'll do my best...*

*I'll do my best and take my time until all my wounds have healed.*

*So please, snow, would you wrap around my feelings ever so softly until then?*

Some time passed since then, and it finally became February 14.

Touma Kazusa became eligible to enter Kisaragi Music College...



# Epilogue

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"Oh god, the outside looks cold!"

"The snow seems to be falling again~!"

"Are you serious? There's still some left over from last week!"

The classmates at the entryway looked at the sky with resentment in their voices.

They piled up all together from one, to two, reaching tens of people that flooded the road in front of the Ogiso residence entryway.

"No one forgot anything? Well then, thank you all for coming."

And the one who led them gave everyone a farewell at the end, seeing them all gathered.

February 14.

The party that celebrated Ogiso Setsuna's birthday and graduation had ended like that.

"See you, Setsuna!"

"See you tomorrow~!"

"Ah~... kinda depressing that we still have to go to school tomorrow~"

"Can't be helped. Today's Thursday."

"Well, if it's a pain you can always skip right? Besides there don't seem to be classes that actually act like classes."

"I'm definitely going... not many chances left to see Ogiso-chan."

"Sure one to complain when you're fooling around and didn't even get recommended."

"A-Ahaha... see you later."

She called her friends.

Many of them.

Just like from middle school, she called all her classmates . Just like from middle school, they flooded the Ogiso residence.

To Setsuna, this may have been the first day this year that she's smiled from the bottom of her heart.

"Whew~ it's finally over~"

"I didn't get to eat much..."

"Thanks for all the hard work and help, Io, Takeya-kun."

And at the end, without meaning anything good or bad, Setsuna exchanged words with the two who helped to promote the party.

"Oh man~ I just felt like gathering a group to commemorate our graduation, and there was no way we could use the assembly hall."

"Hey, you should at least do that with your own class. Why'd you call all the girls from my class anyway?"

"Well, the number one girl in class A is so amazing she wouldn't not stand out, but actually there are a lot of other cute girls too~ is what I was thinking..."

"Really, thank you..."

"Well, you don't have to be so solemn about it..."

"We just felt like making some noise is all."

"No really, thank you."

"..... you're welcome."

Setsuna had an infinite amount of gratitude to give them, with a smile showing far more sincerity than her bow.

Because, what started the party without a hitch today was...

Well, to begin with, they were the ones who encouraged her into having the party today.

"Good night, you two~!"

"Later, Setsuna-chan. We're going to ski next next month, skiing!"

"This season I'm fine with going skiing or snowboarding, okay?"

"Then, you wanna have a meeting about it? At a nearby family restaurant?"

"Eh~ with the two of you?"

"Don't wanna?"

"... hmm~, well, doesn't really matter. Let's go, let's go."

"... what kind of turn of events is this?"

"What are you gonna do commenting like that, despite being the one to invite her...?"

For a while, the chatter the two had echoed in the residential area, even when they turned the corner and disappeared.

"... heheh..."

And, the moment the voices completely disappeared, Setsuna also looked up at the sky, her breath leaving puffs of white.

Today was really great.

It was perfect.

Her memories of middle school with guys and girls from her class calling her "*Setsuna*" had been revived.

Which was why, tomorrow too was...

"Congratulations on entering... Kazusa."

That single, yet great regret was closed up along with winter, and she vowed to work hard for the next several days until graduation.

Because, it was still hard for it to be the "*three of them*".

Because it was the most fun, and yet the most painful time of their lives.

But, surely in Spring...

With a new season, a new campus, and surely new friends.

Those "*two*" would become "*five*", and as long as many others are there...

"All right!"

Setsuna once again breathed of puff of white air up to the sky...

Opening the door to the entryway, she thought of the trouble that would come with cleaning after the party.



# Epilogue 2

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"Setsuna..."

"..... eh?"

Though she had sworn to do her best...

"Happy birthday."

"Haruki-kun..."

Even so, that one great regret she had...

The friends that were late to her party...

There was one person who she couldn't come to invite, yet he had come nosing his way in.

"Well, somehow I managed to make it, didn't I?"

"Eh, w-w... why?"

Even though they shouldn't have known.

Not even Haruki, and not even her other best friend.

"I'm sorry for coming late... it just took me a bit of time to get this."

"A-Ah..."

A basket swung from inside a large bag that Haruki had in his hand.

"Having said that, this was something someone in the store recommended, you can decide if it's good or bad."

"T-Thank you..."

Setsuna held out her hands as he passed her the basket.

*"Thump."*

"...!"

It'd been a while since she'd felt his hands, and at that moment...

It was as if Setsuna's heart had jumped.

"Umm, Setsuna..."

"... a-ah... that's right! Kazusa... congratulation for your admission!"

And, as if to keep him from noticing her miserable reaction, indeed Setsuna's voice jumped, adding more to her shame.

"... yeah, thanks. But, tell her that in person."

"It's okay now. Because, if I tell you, Haruki-kun, you'll definitely tell Kazusa!"

"Eh...?"

"You're going to be going to see Kazusa, right? You're going to congratulate her for her admission, right?"

"Ah, well... I guess."

"T-T-Then, see you later! Thanks for the present, bye!"

She wanted to leave this place as soon as possible.

Even if it was just a step sooner, she wanted to run away.

Because it was so cold, and so hot.

Because her behavior was so suspicious, it was miserable.

And, because it was still painful.

To be with both of them, and to be with one of them.

... and to be aware of the time that those two had spent.

"Wait, Setsuna!"

"...!"

Even so...

Why was it that him calling her name would sew her feet into the ground?

"Umm, you know..."

"I-I have to go and clean up... we'll talk tomorrow."

"We have to talk today, it can't be any other day."

"W-Why..."

"Because your birthday... there's only two hours left until it's finished..."

"My birthday?"

"I want the three of us to celebrate."

"~~~!?"

She had predicted.

That Haruki would surely bring up this "*taboo*" word.

"What..... are you talking about, Haruki-kun?"

But, no one could guarantee that there wouldn't be a shock from hearing that word, even if it were predicted.

"You're going to be celebrating Kazusa's admission, right? Today's a day you have to be with her, right!?"

"Yeah, together."

"T-T-Then...!"

"Right now, we'll go to her house together, okay?"

"To Kazusa's...?"

"To her underground studio, where the three of us'll have a party together."

And, the moment Haruki spoke of those "*sacred grounds*" meant for the three of them...

Setsuna's mind indulged itself with vivid memories of the past half year.

"Let's celebrate your birthday, and Kazusa's admission, okay?"

The incomplete band made up of only a vocalist, guitarist, a keyboard, and no drummer.

Where they had no skilled players and so few days, where the majority was optimistic and relied on the genius in the minority.

They'd practice individually, put their music together, eat together, consult each other, get into fights, stay overnight, get out of bed, practice individually, put their music together...

The three laughed, got angry, and run with such high tension through sleepless nights...

All of this happened in that room.

During those entrancing days.

In those treasured memories.

"You... you can't do that..."

"Why...?"

However, Setsuna used as much reasoning as she had, cutting away those memories.

"Kazusa'll get hurt..."

If she doesn't, the sadness and tears she had for the past several days will be all for naught.

"Kazusa always wants to be with Haruki-kun, right? Especially on an important day like this, right? It can't be good for me to be with you two..."

Because, she had already given up...

"Kazusa won't get hurt! I won't get hurt any longer..."

And because she did, nothing would make her waver any longer.

"What do you... mean by that...?"

She'd given Kazusa and Haruki her blessing, and move on to a new path of her own.

"Well... you see..."

Maybe they might cross paths, but it wouldn't be on such a deep level.

Yes, that would be enough. Because, she no longer has any regrets...

"Because, there's nothing at all that can get between me and Kazusa... you see..."

"Eh...?"

Nothing, at all?

Not even what ties Haruki and Setsuna?

And, that wouldn't go between Haruki and Kazusa...?

"Tha... that's..."

"..... yeah..."

"...!"

She understood through his embarrassment far more than his words.

That Haruki and Kazusa were so strongly bound together.

... or, that they already were.

"You see, I actually do like Kazusa."

"....."

"But, I also want you to be with us, Setsuna."

She knew.

That Kazusa and Haruki were already "*those kind of lovers*" from long ago.

"It's cowardly, and maybe it's something cruel to do but... Setsuna is an important friend to me, a best friend. Is that fine with you?"

But, the moment Haruki himself made that declaration...

"And Kazusa you see... she really does things on a whim, gets rather violent, and selfish. There are particular things about her, and it's difficult for her to be with others, too."

The heat within Setsuna's body gradually faded away.

"Even so, she likes you, Setsuna. She really likes you. Just like me."

The chills spread throughout her, even eroding her heart.

"So you know, it might be a bit clumsy but... could the three of us be together from now on?"

It desperately spread throughout her, as if to freeze her emotions. Emotions that, if she spat them out now, she wouldn't know what tone they would take on.

"You'll be Kazusa's best friend from now on too, right, Setsuna?"

However...

Setsuna could no longer tell whether she'd quieted down, or if she'd been all fired up.

"Maybe, maybe what I've decided is wrong as well."

—Yup, *it certainly is...*

"But you know, let's just try first, okay? If it doesn't work out, we can always try again, right?"

——*You can't, Haruki-kun.*

*You're mistaking me for someone else.*

Setsuna knew.

That from the bottom of his heart, Haruki believed in friendship.

"Is it okay?"

"....."

And Setsuna learned.

That Haruki hadn't understood a single thing.

About how much she had cried, about how much she had suffered.

About how much she had decided to cut everything down, just about everything...

"Setsuna, umm..."

"Hey, Haruki-kun..."

"Eh...?"

Then, Setsuna took a light step forward with a smile on her face.

"Hold this, okay?"

"O-Okay...?"

And she once again handed over the potted plant that he had just given her.

"Be sure to hold it well. Don't drop it, okay?"

"Setsuna, what are you doing...?"

Of course, as Setsuna told him to, Haruki held that potted plant with both of his hands, so as to not drop it.

Because, the moment he used both of his hands...

"Mmm..."

"~!?"

He couldn't stop both of Setsuna's hands as they reached for his cheeks.

Nor Setsuna's body as it leaned forward.

... nor the fact her lips touched his, nothing at all.

"Mm, mm..."

"Mmm, mmm, ah...!"

——*I'm sorry, Haruki-kun.*

*I'm a liar. The worst woman you could meet.*

*I'm a traitor who's bad at giving up.*

Setsuna knew her chances of winning were low.

*I'll go down in flames.*

*I'll erase our friendship, the three of us, and that you rejected me.*

*I'll erase the two of you as you are.*

She knew she'd destroy the three of them as they were.

She knew everyone would get hurt.

She knew that, probably, she'd become the most miserable in all of this.

——*But, but you know?*





*Say it's one in a million chance, and that was also divided by a million...*

*It's an almost zero percent chance, and an almost zero possibility, but if it's there...*

And then, for just a bit...

She hoped that Haruki would make the worst decision possible...

# Epilogue 3

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"~~~!!"

She jumped up from her bed with a shriek.

"..... ah?"

The first thing that jumped into her vision upon opening her eyes was a familiar ceiling, illuminated by an eastern light coming from the window.

It was the morning she was used to.

The morning she had been used to for three years.

"Haa..."

Lightly shaking her head, she slowly got out of bed, pondering over the fuzzy memories that remained from just now.

... well, perhaps it was him.

... or perhaps, he was there, and she was also there.

"... I destroyed everything again..."

It was another dreampossibility, different from reality.

A challenge in order to reach "*a future where the three can smile happy together*". A reality different from how three years ago, the group of three became a pair and one person, and then each person went their separate ways.

She didn't know how many more times she had to repeat this...

Even so, both her and the guy, and even the three of them hadn't found the answer they sought. They can only continue to be tormented every night.